

# Children Eclipsed by Natural and Unnatural Disaster

What They Are Telling Us and What We Can Do

A Presentation of the Connecticut Commission on Children

Legislative Office Building, Hartford

September 11, 2006



For more information, contact the Connecticut Commission on  
Children, 860-240-0290 or [www.cga.ct.gov/coc](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc).





For five years now, September 11 has been a major backdrop in the development of our children. More recently, Hurricane Katrina has become an all-too-vivid memory of natural disaster and our nation's slow response. How children and youth incorporate the images and information from both of these events will influence their world view.

With that in mind, the Connecticut Commission on Children, the Connecticut Department of Emergency Management & Homeland Security, and the State Department of Education issued an invitation to students throughout the state: Share your thoughts on terrorism, natural disasters, and your safety in general through poems, essays, letters, and artwork.

Submissions arrived from more than 2,300 students. These children live in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. They cross age, class, and race. Yet some common elements emerge in their words and art:

Students are concerned that adults are not fully in control and protecting them.

- They see the world as increasingly dysfunctional and torn apart. Where are the adults who should be stopping all of this?

Anthony

Grade 7  
New Haven



Our world is becoming so dysfunctional: hate and bullying from young people, hurricanes destroying everything, and pollution and fires. The world is tearing apart so people need to get their heads straight and save the world.



# Our World Today

Our world today  
Filled with Violence and drugs  
Every day I walk home  
Scared I'll be jumped by thugs  
The twin towers the terrorists attacked  
Where is the love?  
This world is crazy and whacked

I want to live  
In a peaceful world  
Where the grown-ups don't fight  
And the kids can just play  
So please stop the nonsense  
And please do not fight  
Stop being so tense  
And just do what is right.

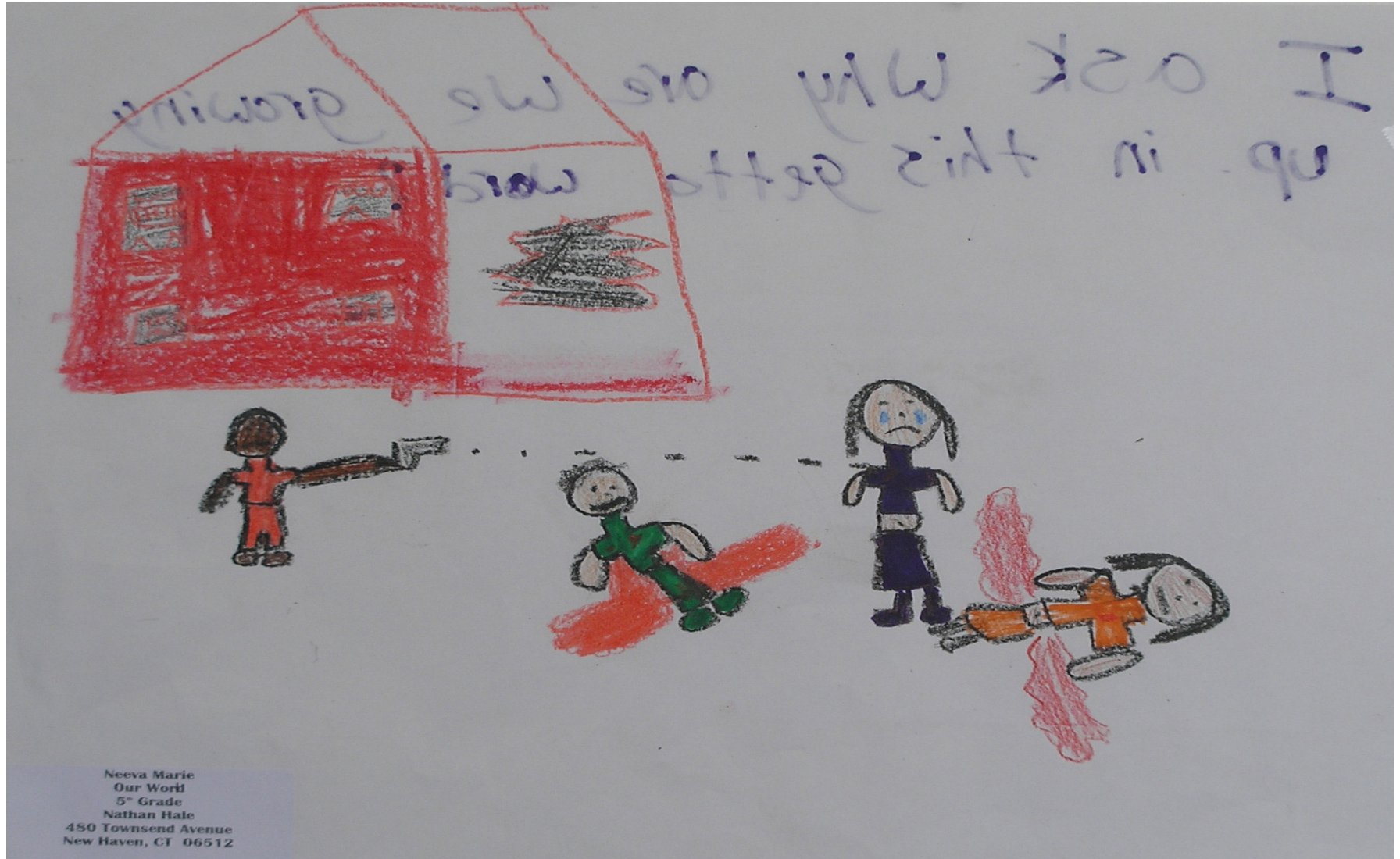
-- Nicole  
Grade 6, East Haven

Many students do not feel safe.

- Some feel safer than others within their homes, but all worry about what's going on outside.
- It doesn't matter where they live - city, suburb, or small town.

Neeva Marie  
Grade 5, New Haven  
"Our World"

"I ask why do we grow up  
in this ghetto world?"



Neeva Marie  
Our World  
5<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Nathan Hale  
480 Townsend Avenue  
New Haven, CT 06512

Am I safe? That is one of the most asked questions that I ask myself when I wake up to go to school in the morning. I do feel safe in my neighborhood, and I also feel safe in my school, but not in my country. Why? Because every day we get threats of violence on our homeland, and I feel that my security here in America is not too good.

Michael  
Grade 8, East Haven

Students want to know what their communities and the state are doing to keep them safe.

- If an emergency occurs while I'm at day care or my after-school program, will I be evacuated? Who will assist my disabled friends? How will we reach our parents? Is there a designated meeting place?



Dear Governor Rell:

I have a few questions for you about my safety in Connecticut. I feel that I can't walk out of my house without worrying about getting taken or having what happened to the Twin Towers. I mean I feel comfortable when I'm around my friends and family but when I'm by myself alone I feel like something horrible is going to happen like it did over in New York City, they had no warning on September 11. I'm just afraid that might happen here in Connecticut. I don't really feel safe by myself since that happened.

Sincerely,

Heather Ann  
Grade 6  
New Milford

Dear Governor Rell:

Who is in charge of the homeland security system in Connecticut?

How often does the homeland security system department contact you?

Have there been any problems with the Connecticut homeland security system so far?

How are you working to improve the Connecticut homeland security system?

How has the homeland security system affected our state budget?

If I see someone or something suspicious, what should I do?

-- Abby, Grade 8, Brookfield

The boundaries between different types of threats are blurring.

- For many, little difference remains between events like Katrina, the war in Iraq, and the threat of violence close to home.
- Somehow, a rush of dangers has knocked the fence down.

Julia  
Grade 5, Stamford

"It's a Dark, Dark, World"



My 10 Words:

1. Scary
2. Dark
3. Violent
4. Ugly
5. Unforgiving
6. Bad
7. Crazy
8. Strong
9. Rude
10. Huge

## Scared

As I walk down my long driveway with my brother,  
I feel as if someone is going to take me away from my home.  
It frightens me.

The walk down to the house is silent.  
As I run inside I lock the door,  
To make sure no one will rob us again.  
I walk on to the patio my dad built;  
Jets are flying so close to my house,  
I feel a flashback on September 11th.  
In the distance, I see a blinking light,  
Is someone spying on me?  
I can't tell.

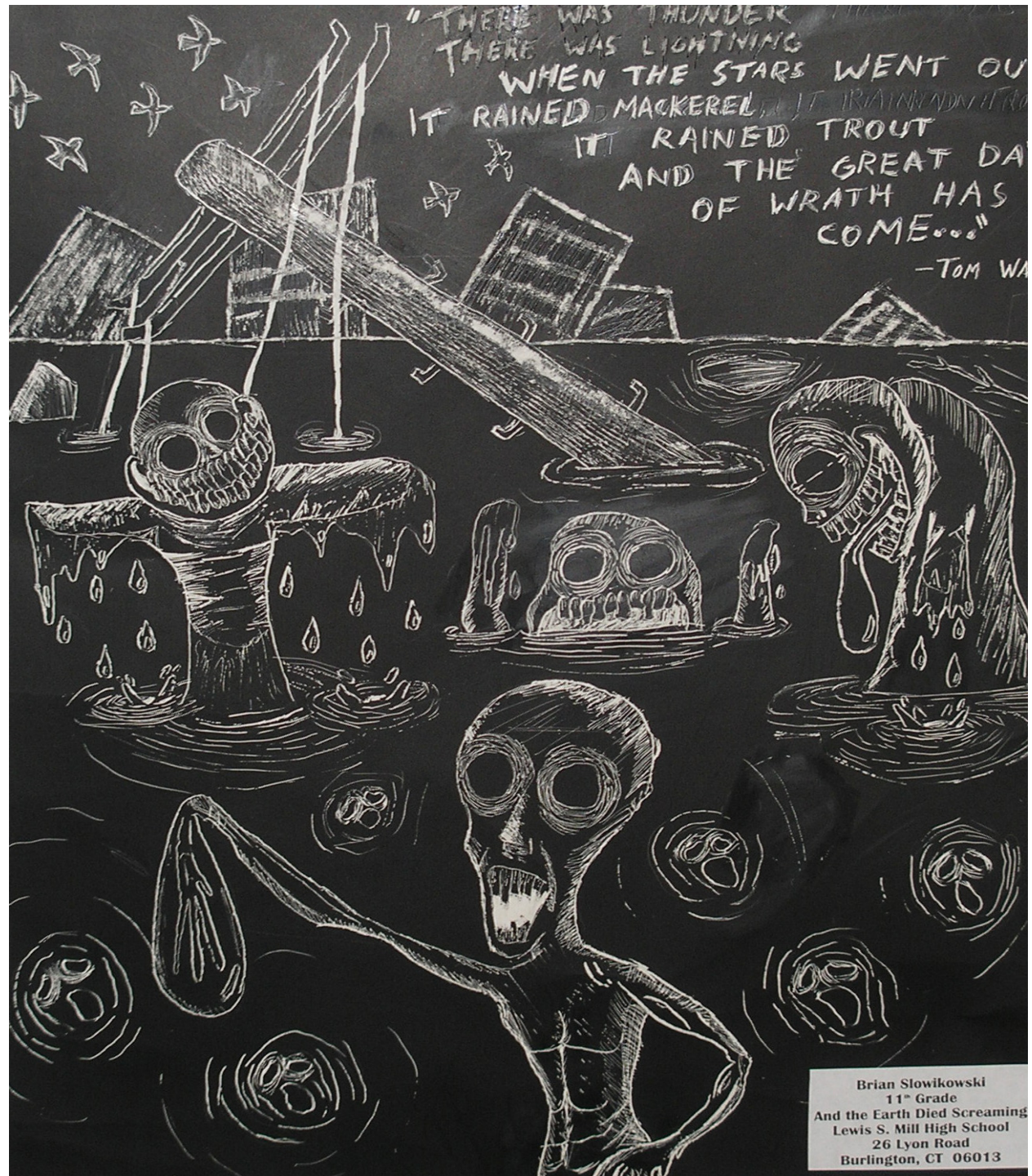
Melanie  
Grade 4, Middlefield



Brian

Grade 11,  
Burlington

"And the  
Earth died  
screaming"



Students are ahead of adults on the joys of diversity.

- Students are comfortable with diversity. They want adults to stop feuding over skin color and faith.



We're All Different,  
But It Doesn't Mean We  
Shouldn't Help Each Other



Natasha Golouchenko  
4<sup>th</sup> Grade  
George Hersey Robertson  
Intermediate School  
Coventry, CT 06238

## Natasha Grade 4 Coventry

"We're all  
different, but it  
doesn't mean we  
shouldn't help each  
other."

Imagine what the world would be if  
There were no prejudice or hate.  
We'd treat each other equally.  
We could all celebrate!

Alexa  
Grade 5, Shelton

Damian  
Grade 4, Manchester





Children have everyday heroes - and want to be heroes themselves.

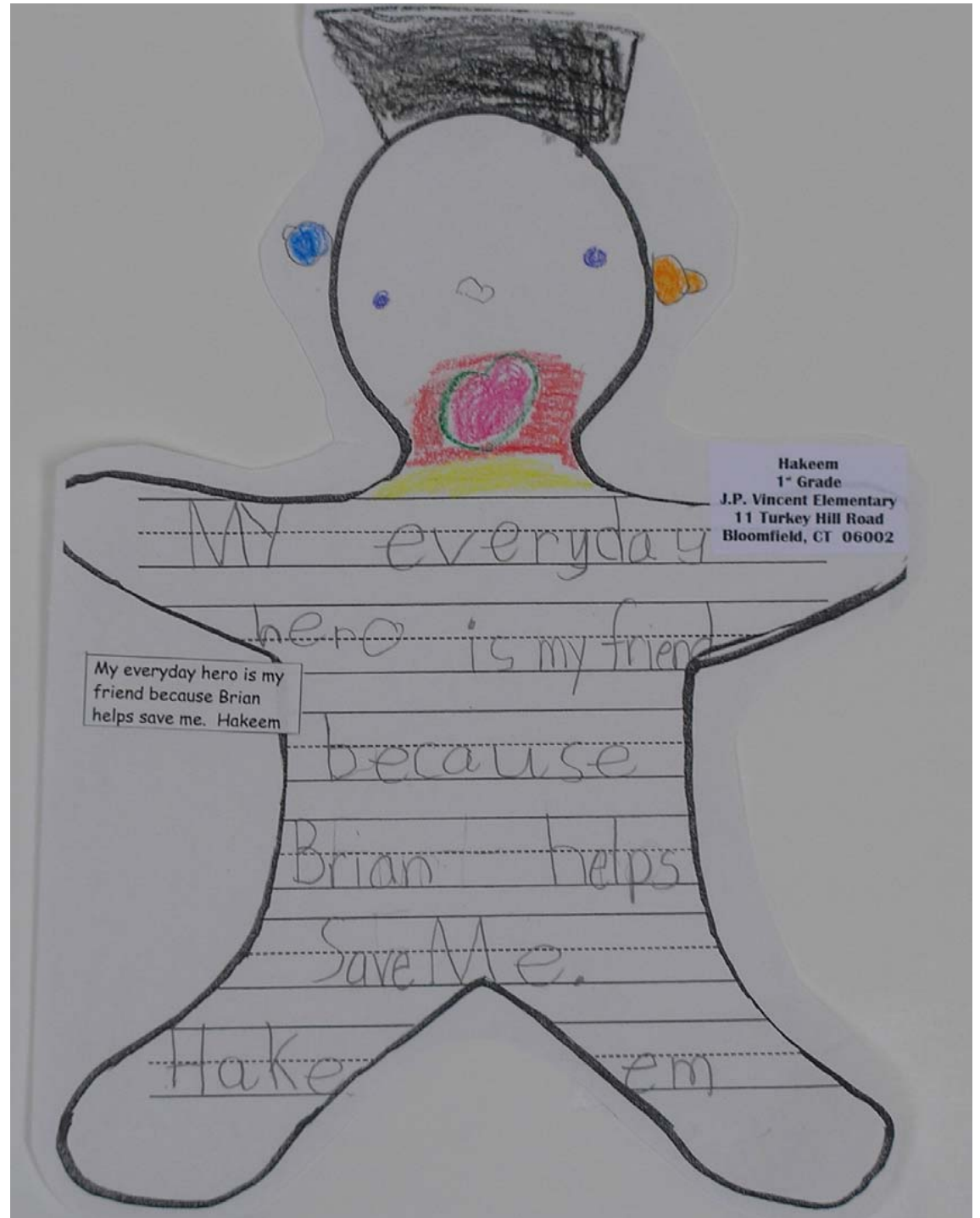
- Many remember the heroes who helped in unimaginable ways on 9-11.
- They know that heroism occurs close to home.

Hakeem

Grade 1,  
Bloomfield

My Hero

"My everyday hero  
is my friend  
because Brian  
helps save me."

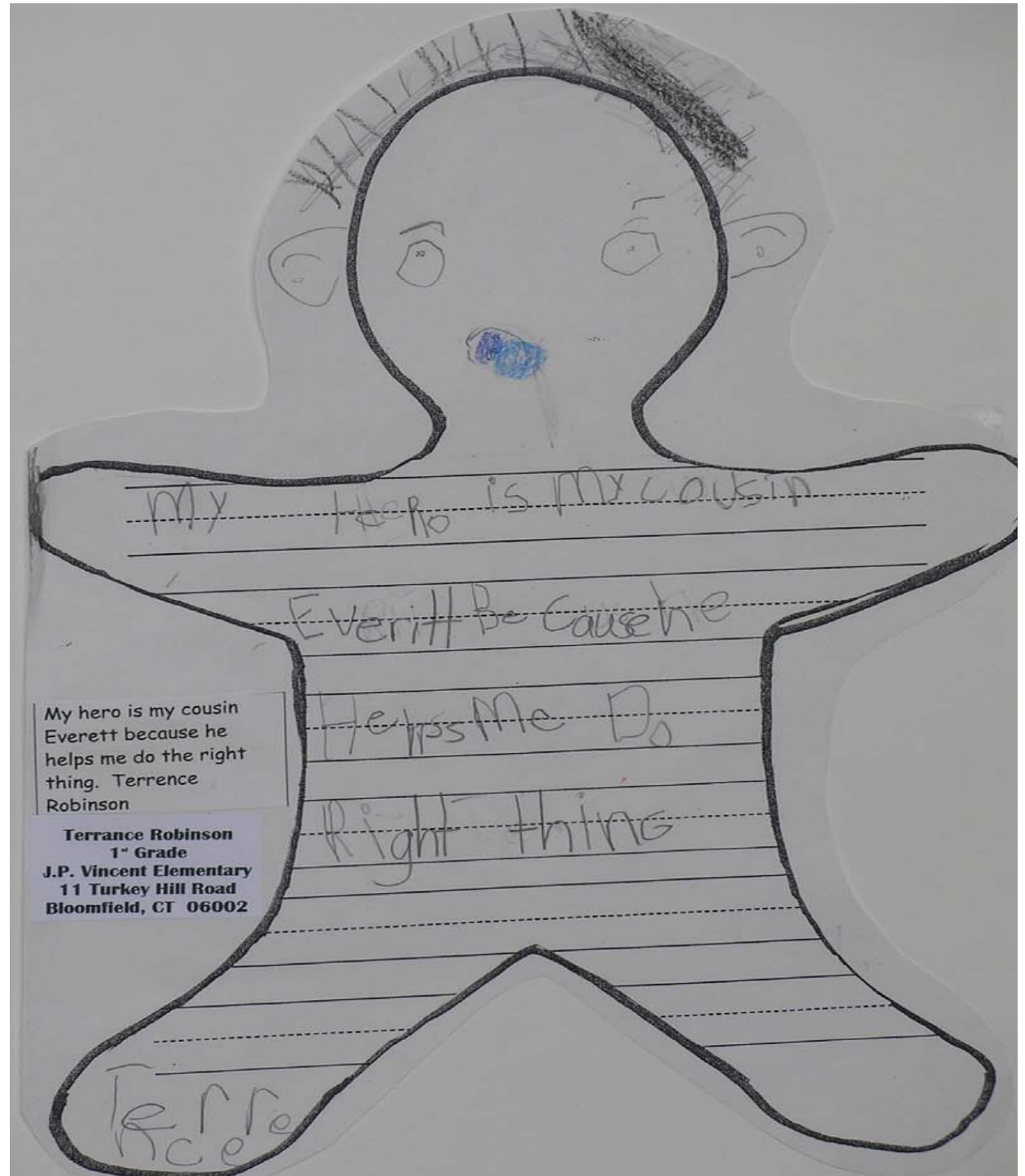


Terrence

Grade 1,  
Bloomfield

"My Hero"

"My hero is my cousin  
Everett because he  
helps me to do the  
right thing."

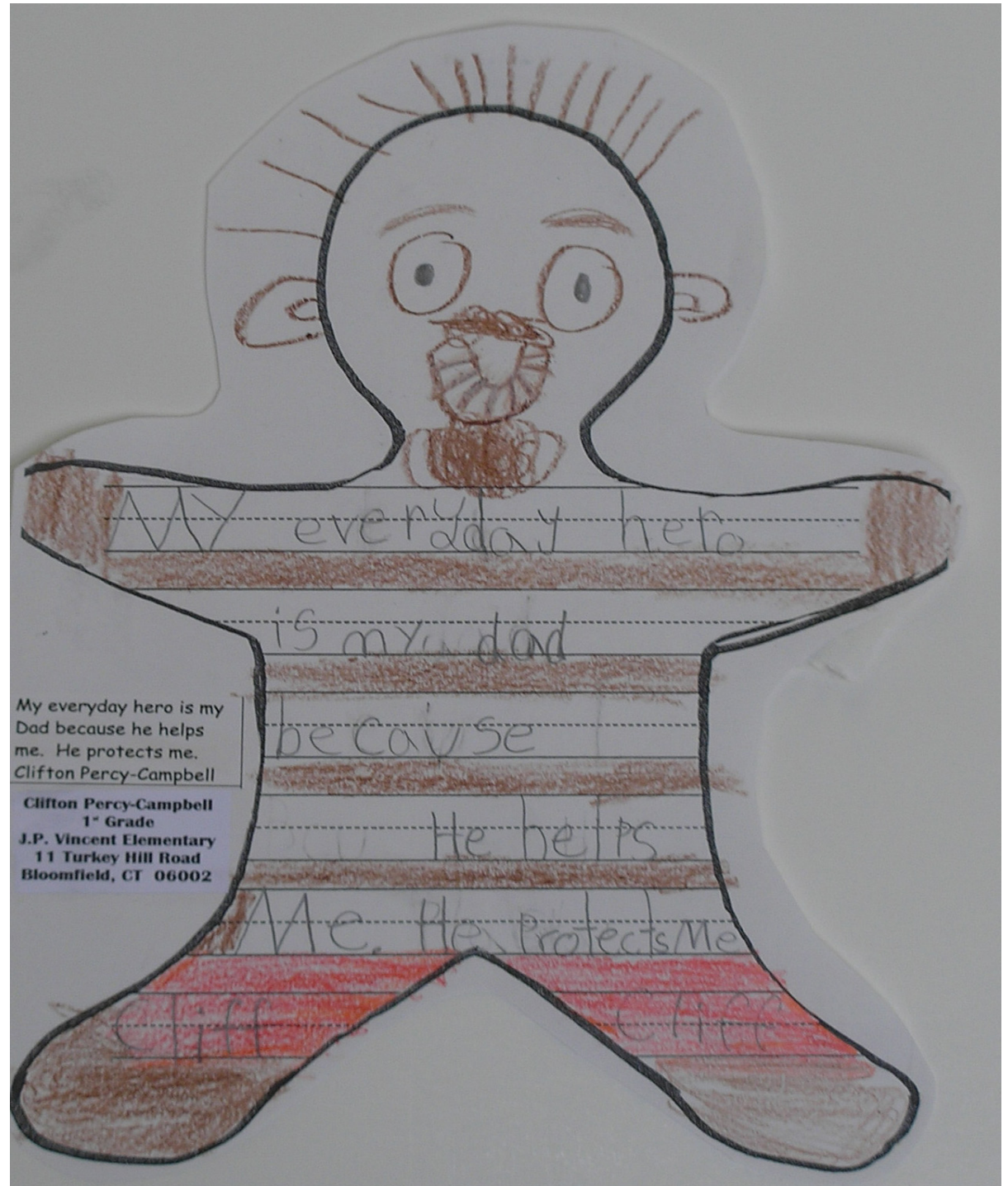


Clifton

Grade 1,  
Bloomfield

"My Hero"

"My everyday hero is  
my Dad because he  
helps me. He protects  
me."





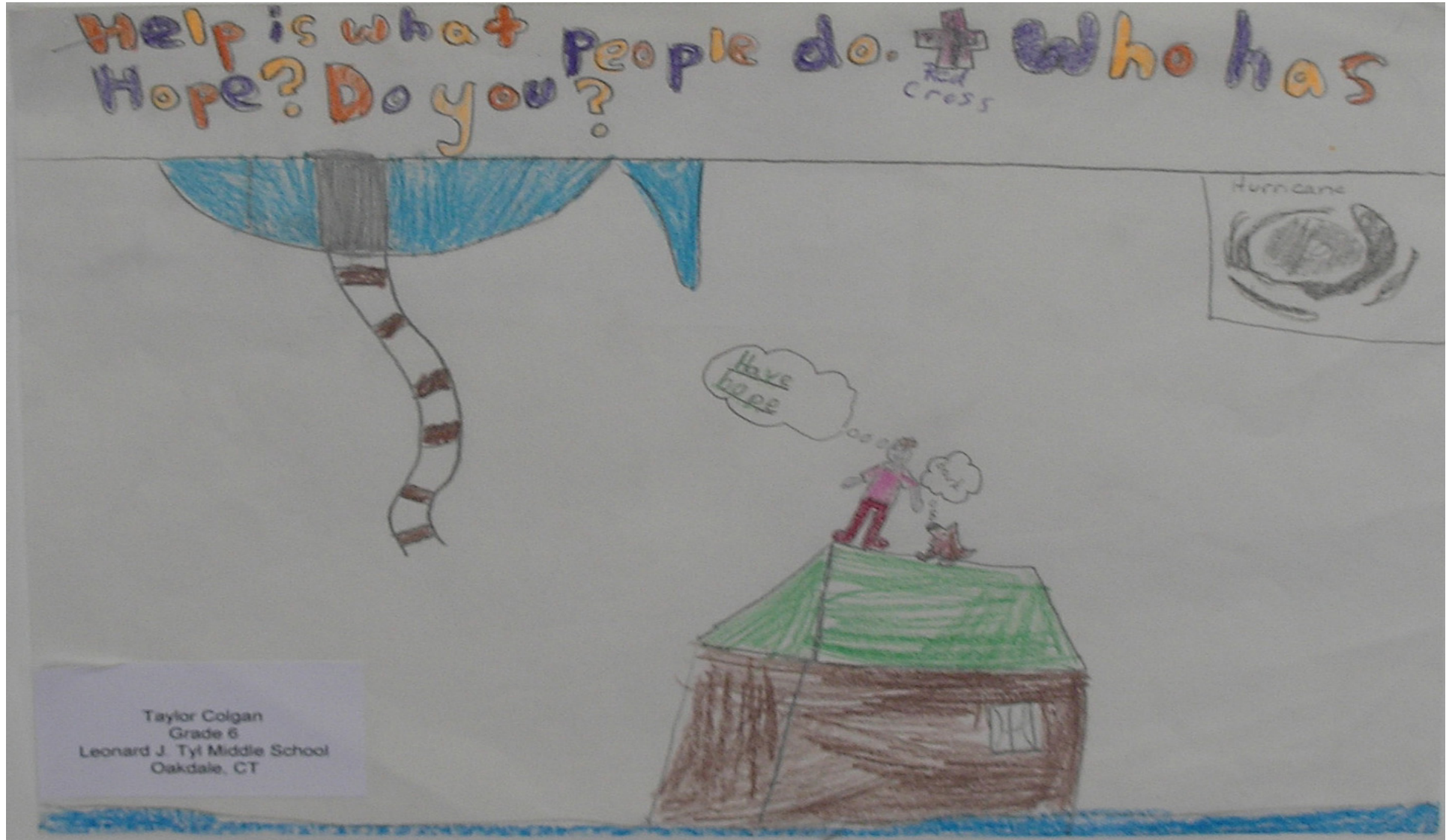
Students want to give back but feel ignored as contributors to society.

- They want to do their share and be part of a community.
- Youth's compassion and social concern seem largely untapped.



Taylor  
Grade 6, Oakdale

"Helping is what people do. Who has hope? Do you?"



Dear Hurricane Katrina Survivor,

I'm sorry that you lost your home. In any way I want to help you! I felt so bad that I want to go to my bank account and donate all my money just to help you! I can't write any more. I just can't imagine what you are going through. I have to ask, do you have any friends? If you don't I will be your friend. My first name is Nicholas, last name Del Mastro. I live in New Milford, Connecticut. My phone number is ...

Nicholas

Grade 3, New Milford

Dear Hurricane Katrina Survivor,

I hear it is bad down there. I can only think you are very sad. Just think of the positive things and it will be good in the ending. If you want you can come and stay with me until the construction is done. I would like to have you. I will give you one of my stuffed animals, and you can sleep in my bunk bed. My mom can make a really good chicken pot pie. We'll make you feel right at home, until your home is ready for you.

I hope you feel better soon.

Parker

Grade 4, Manchester

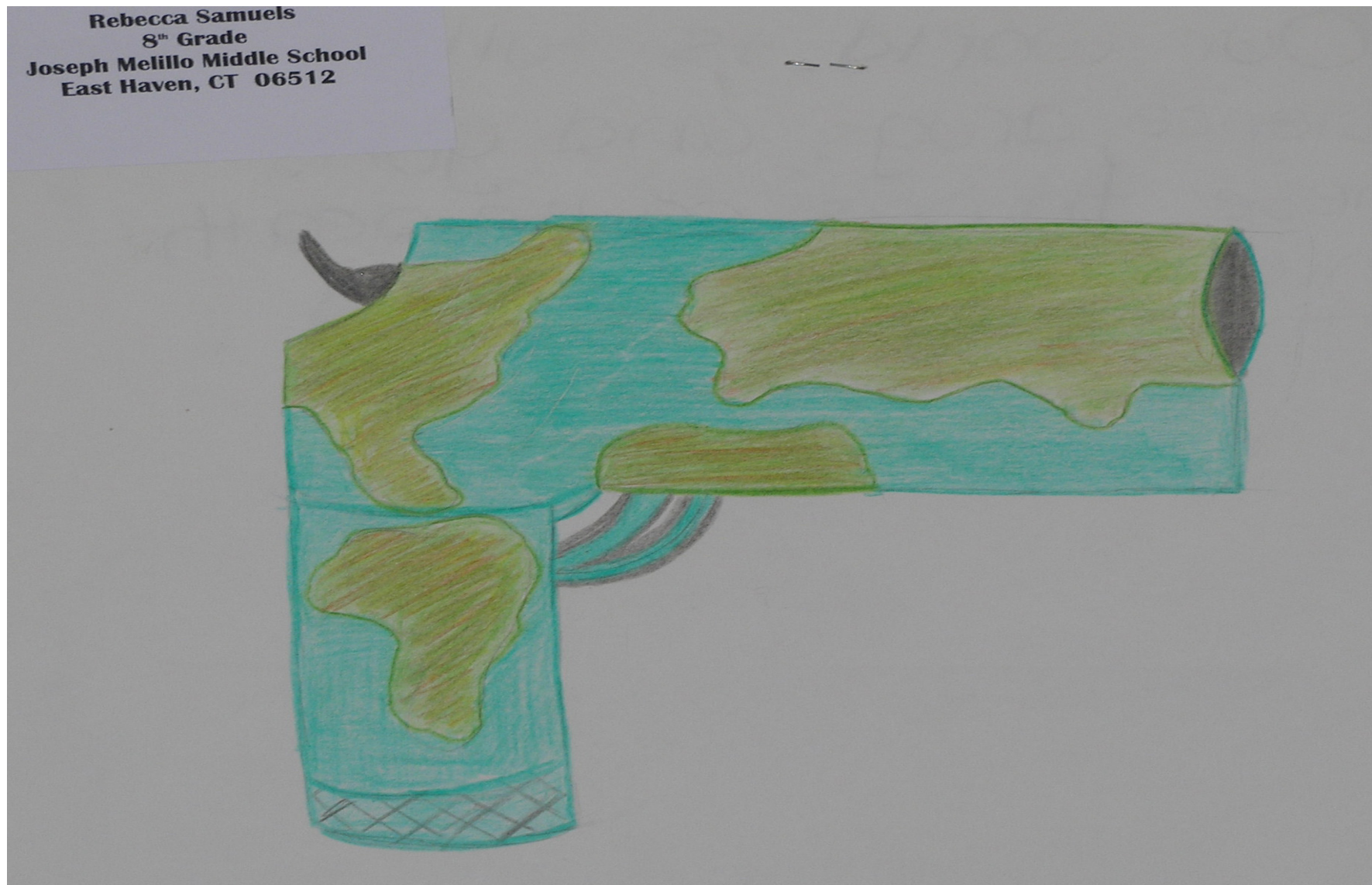
Children do not believe peace is possible.

- Strife has become so commonplace that they question times of calm.
- The joy of so many countries transforming from communism to democracy has been partially eclipsed by terrorism and war.



Rebecca  
Grade 8, East Haven

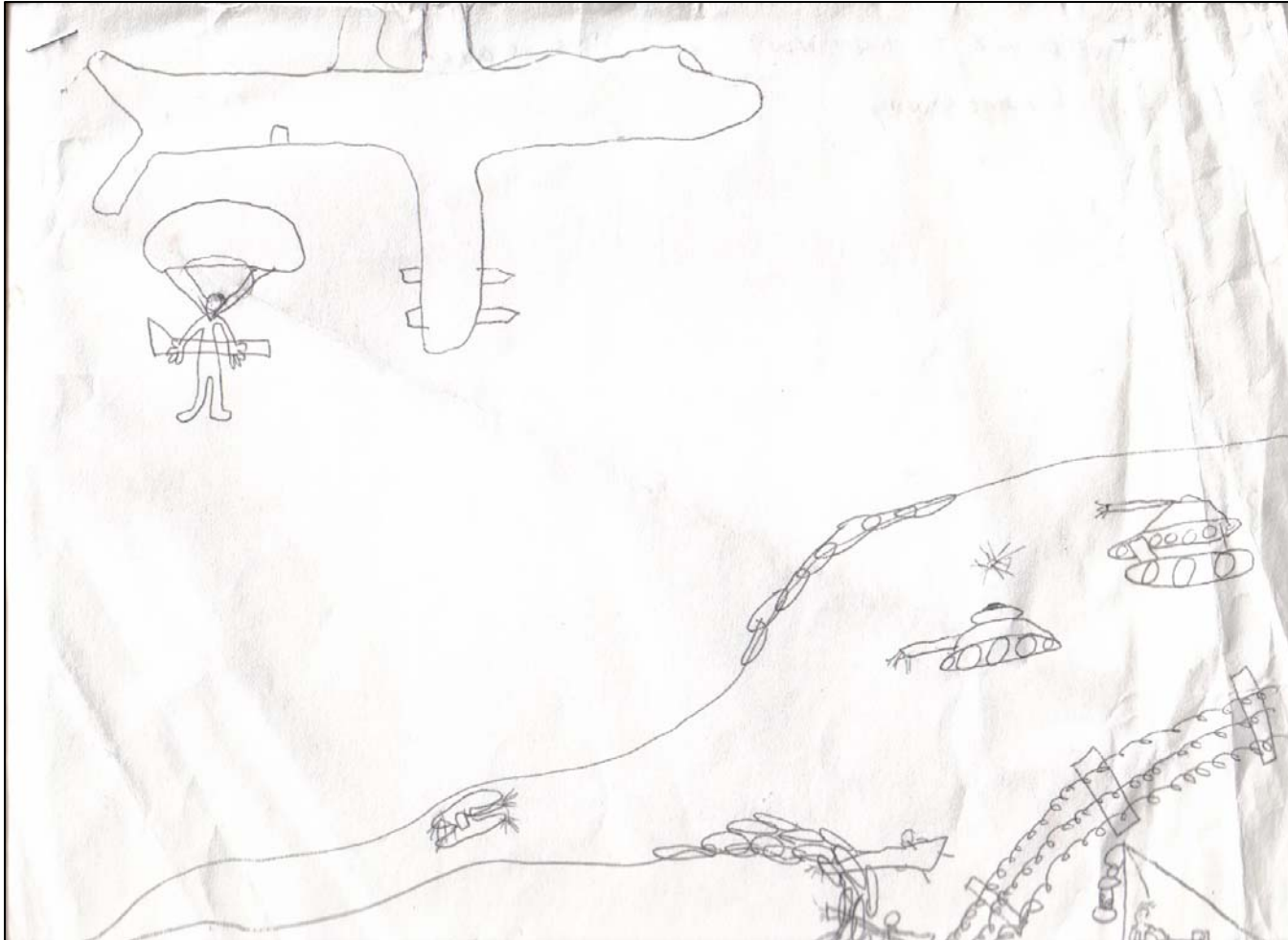
"Our World"





George  
Grade 6, Oakdale

"There are so many wars,  
and this is one."



## World Peace

I stand on a hill  
And breathe the air between two stars  
Looking out among New York  
Two buildings not the same  
World peace will not come  
People differ on ideas and that will never change

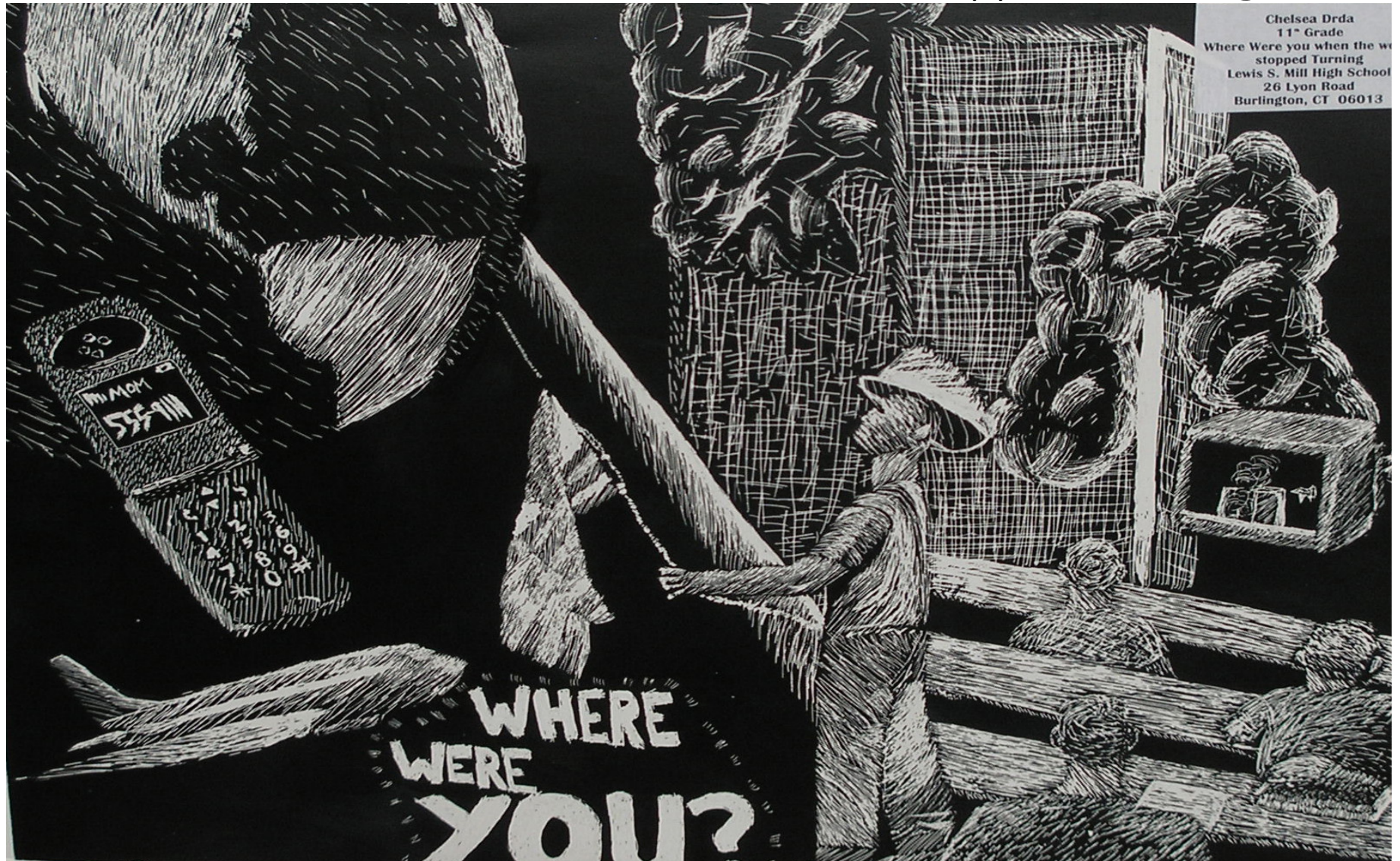
Chelsea  
Grade 8, Canton

The attacks of 9/11 are embedded  
in the memory of children who  
were old enough to experience it.

- It is a backdrop that should not be underestimated.
- How children integrate this riveting shift in the world will contribute to the personality of their generation.



Chelsea  
Grade 11, Burlington  
"Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning?"



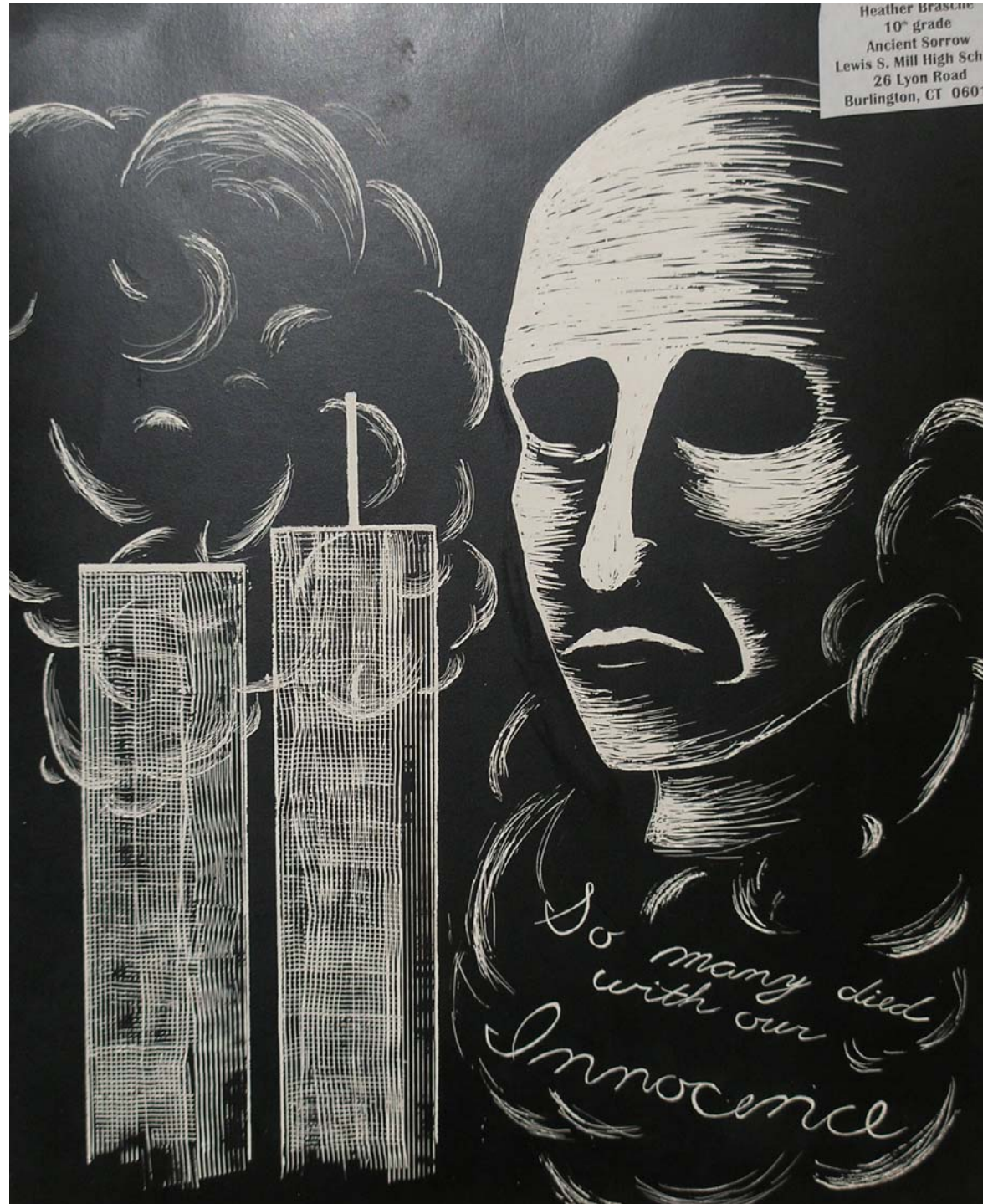
Chelsea Drda  
11<sup>th</sup> Grade  
Where Were you when the w  
stopped Turning  
Lewis S. Mill High School  
26 Lyon Road  
Burlington, CT 06013



Heather

Grade 10,  
Burlington

"Ancient Sorrow"





# Mistrust of government has deepened following Katrina.

- Many Connecticut children watched people who looked just like them on the rooftops of New Orleans, pleading for help.
- They saw people having to explain that they were citizens.
- They saw our country fail in response time and compassion.

Imagine, you are wet, cold and hungry,  
But you move on.  
You have seen this on the news before.  
More than 8,000 miles away,  
Survivors of the tsunami wander the streets  
Looking for food, water and medicine.  
Their lives ravaged by nature's fury.

Except this isn't across the world.  
Here in the U.S.  
People are suffering from starvation, disease and dehydration.  
Images of what seem like a third world country.  
People cry for help, looking for a way out,  
Chaos all around.

If this is a test of our strength as a nation,  
Then I think we have wavered.  
With over 1,000 fatalities,  
And the toll still growing,  
What does it take to bring hope to the people of our country?

Andrew, Grade 10, Waterbury

# Katrina

Can you see them? Don't you care?  
I want to clear the fear in their eyes!  
Don't you listen? Can't you hear?  
Their frantic cries?  
Won't you turn? Can't you hold?  
Them to your heart? Or are you afraid what might  
Follow once you start?  
Would you rather believe that?  
They can be in such pain, that  
All of your senses and good advise  
Must be in vain?  
Or would you rather tell yourself  
Everything will be ok, and  
All of these problems will  
Just go away?

Kristen, Grade 6, Seymour

## Students question adult values.

- Amid ethical lapses in government, poor response times to those in need, and persistent public questions about what is true, some children are confused and mistrustful.

# Save the World

You've started out  
as a young child  
Thinking that the world  
is a good place,  
Good people and NOTHING to worry about.  
Then you grow up,  
you find out what happened to  
The world being a good place?  
What happened to good PEOPLE?  
Why do I have to worry?  
Now it's simple.  
Now you know.  
Help to save the world.  
Do your part of being nice.  
Your friends, family, and peers will follow you.

Gabrielle, Grade 5, Norwich



Dear Governor Rell,

I am writing to you because you wanted to know if I was safe or not. Right now I am safe because I am not hurt in any way; no hurricane hit my state and no wars.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, people lost their homes, they do not have any food. So the school is helping and donating money, food and shelter to help the people who need it.

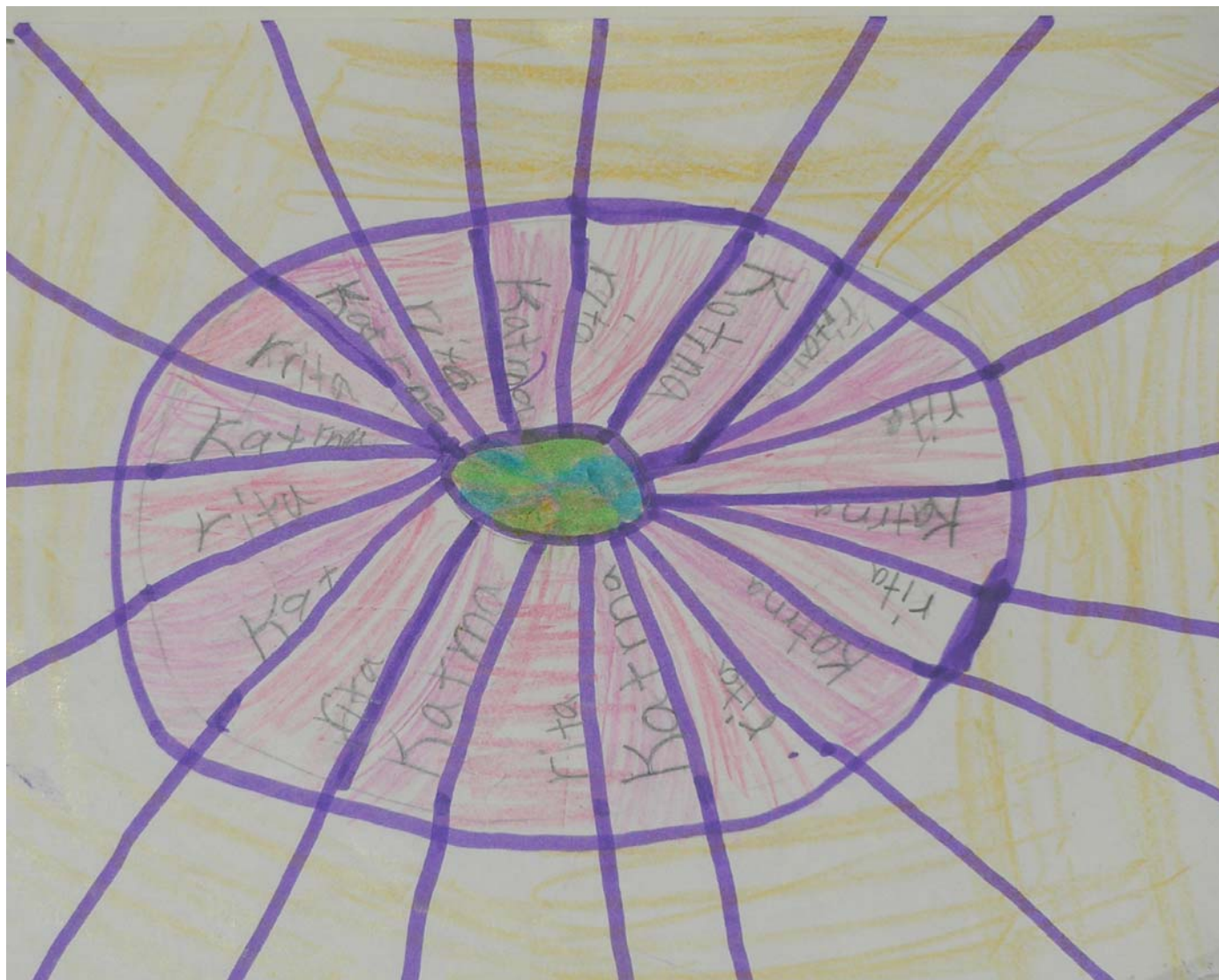
I wish the world was a much better place and safe because people are mean killers, robbers, and kidnappers. People should get along and be nice to each other. That's how wars begin, people hate other people. They should not sell guns in the first place. Guns are for wars but they should not sell guns to people.

I don't feel safe in some places because if you're all alone lost somebody will offer you a ride or someone will tell you if you want a cigar. If that happened to me I would just ignore them and walk away.

Amjed, Grade 5, Wallingford

Students display compassion and concern over deep-rooted social maladies, such as persistent poverty and homelessness.

- They want to repair the world.
- From the youngest to the oldest child, there is a stark awareness of the plight of others.



Nikki

Grade 2  
Vernon

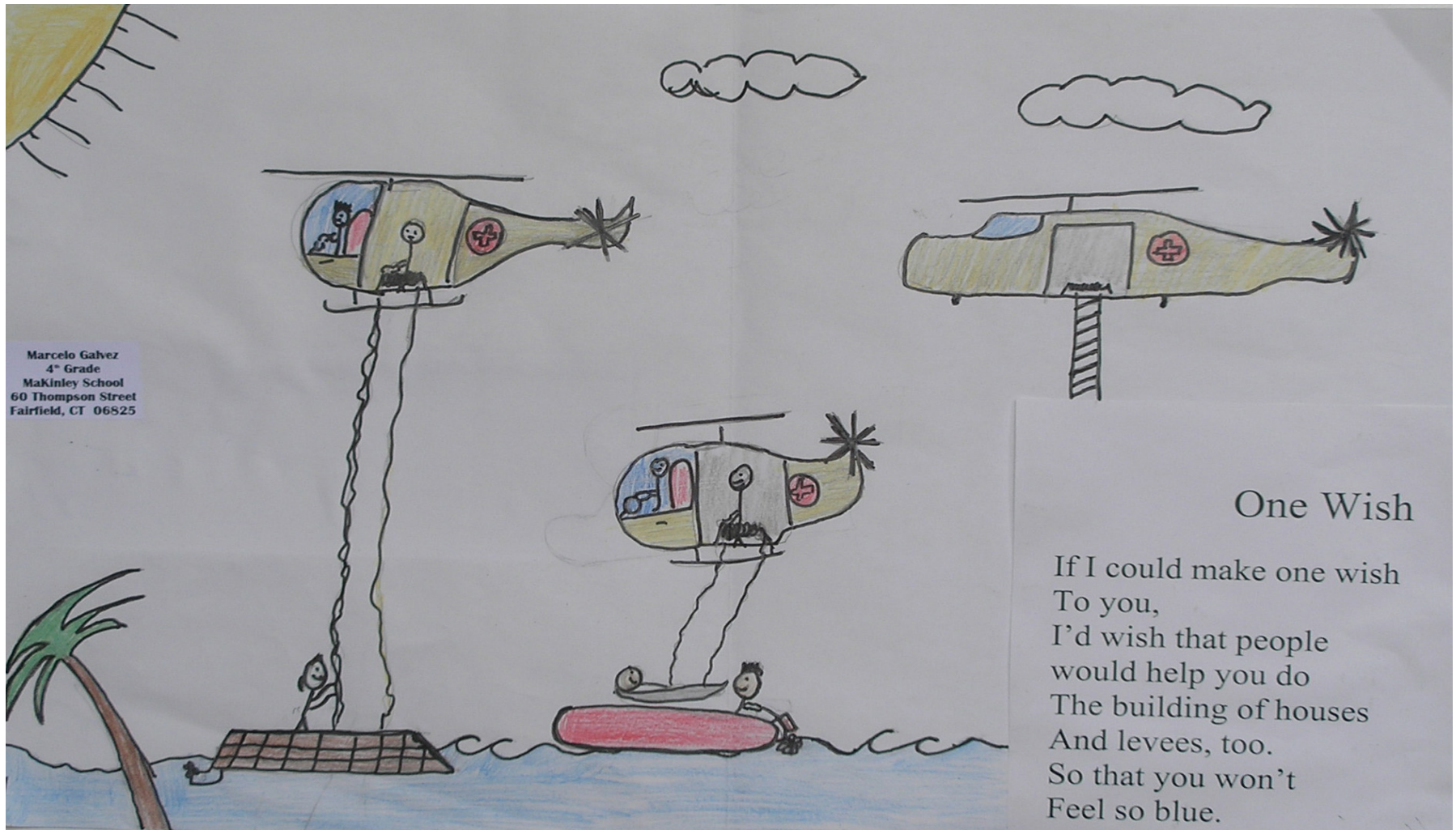
"Letter to  
Children of  
Katrina"

"I am sorry  
about what  
happened to  
your town. I  
wish I could  
help you  
build new  
homes."



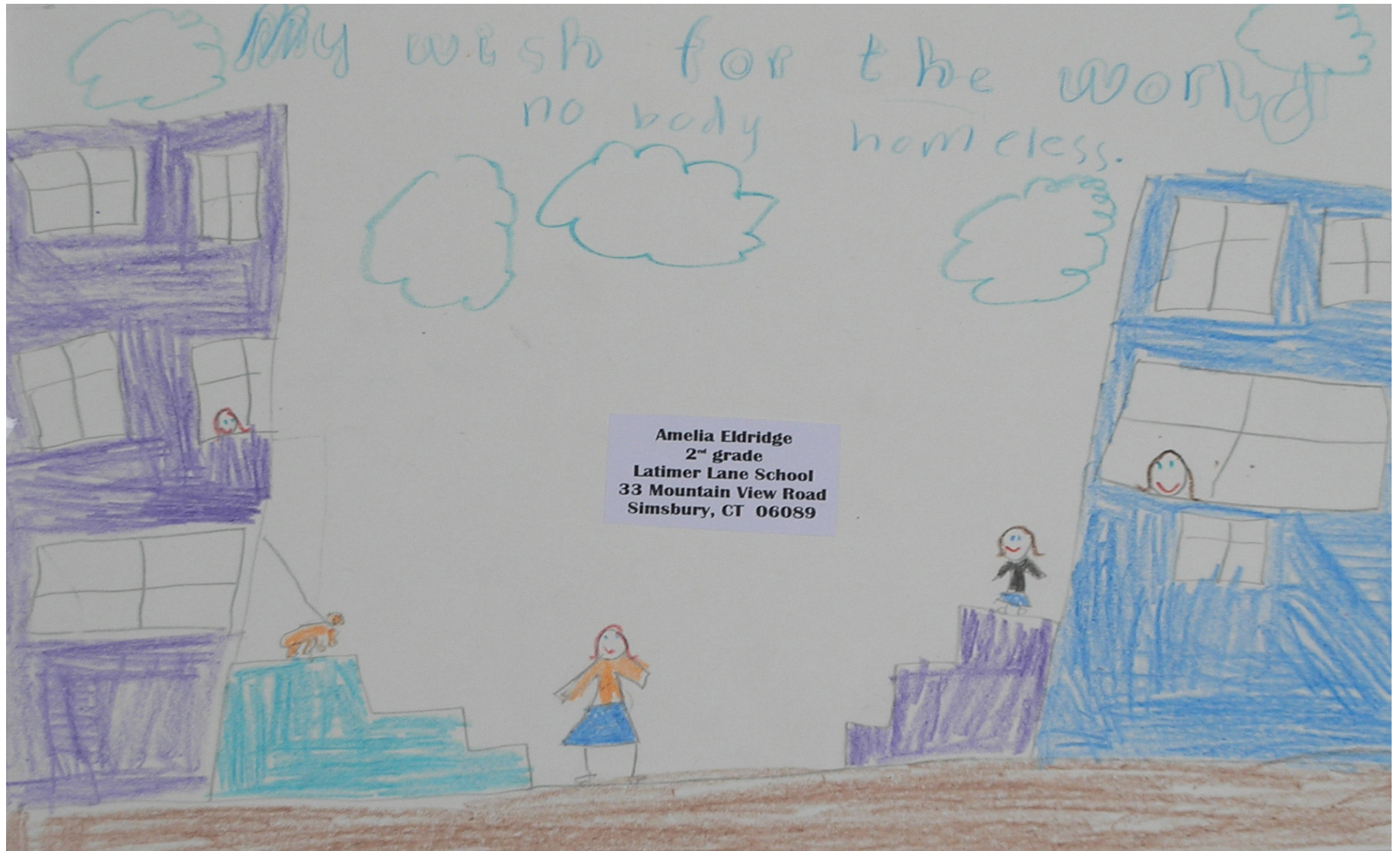
# Marcelo

## Grade 4, Fairfield



"If I could make one wish to you, I'd wish that people would help you do the building of houses and levees, too. So that you won't feel so blue."

Amelia  
Grade 2, Simsbury



"My wish for the world: nobody homeless"



# Students live with opposites and contradictions.

- To them, our world is unsafe, violent, hateful - and yet good.
- This is a healthy sign in a complex time.

# Jonathan

## Grade 6, Brooklyn



"If you were to look down upon the world today, you would see a world divided by wars and natural disaster...you would think there is little hope...Even though there is a lot of bad in the world, we have to believe there is more good. We have to believe in tomorrow."

## The Other Side of Fear

The world is a dangerous place, you know?

You better watch out wherever you go.

Trains and Planes may contain:  
Backpacks, packages, lethal shoes.

...

Vigilantly search for danger,

But don't for a second

Miss signs of beauty,

Goodness, kindness, wonders

You never know,

It may save all of our lives.

Christina, Grade 8, Redding

Connection is longed for - and often missing.

- The students' work shows a keen desire for nurturing and tenderness.



Terry  
Grade 4, Stamford  
"Helping Hand"

"My wish for the world is for everybody  
to lend a helping hand with love."





You feel like your heart has been ripped out  
Your eyes are so dry you can't spread the tears  
All that matters now is that your family is ok,  
Or what's left of it.

Sarah, Grade 8, Ledyard

Colin  
Grade 7, Brooklyn  
"We need more helping hands to pull together"



Hope remains the large backdrop,  
mixed with despair.

- No matter how bleak the picture, there is almost always a wish for change and light.
- We are lucky to have this generation.



## Third Grade Class Goshen

If we could make one wish for the world, it would be to have **peace** for everyone. There would be no wars, no terrorists, no bombs, and no killing. We would feel safe in our neighborhoods. People who are big and small, celebrate different religions, have different colored skin, and believe different things would all get along. We would **enjoy** each other's differences! We would help make sure there were enough medicines, food, and water, and clothes for everyone. We would help each other build homes, schools, and farms. We would focus on **helping** each other, not hurting each other. And if disaster happened, we run to help each other. ...not worry about who should have been there first. **Peace** is our wish for the world!

"...Peace is our wish for the world!"

# Unbroken

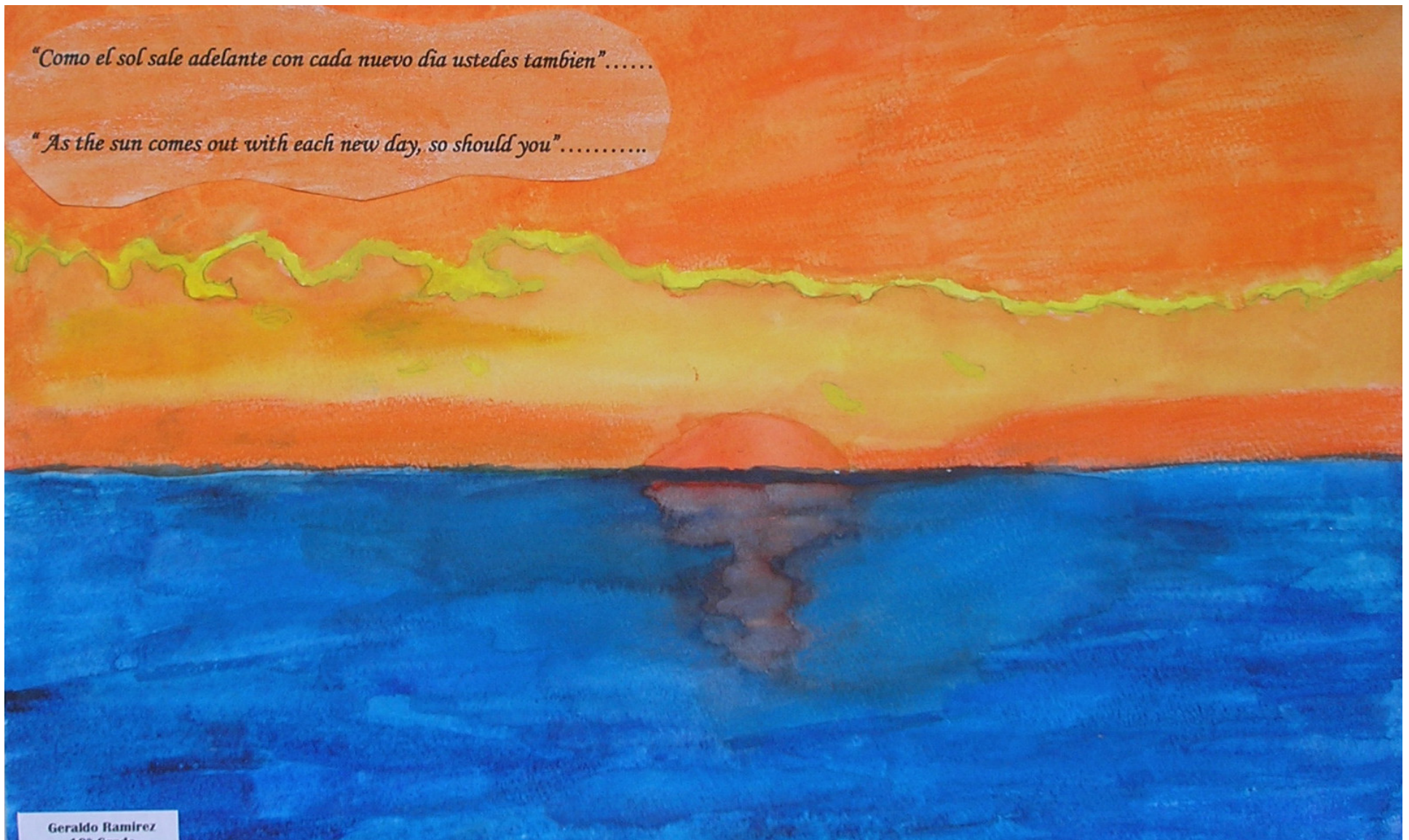
Questions unanswered.  
Families torn apart.  
Homes undone, destroyed, gone.  
People unhappy.  
Robbed, sick, missing loved ones.  
Why has this happened to me?  
Love is unbroken.  
Faith is unbroken.  
Hope is unbroken.  
The strength to hold on,  
Is unbroken.  
Never let it break.

Taylor, Grade 7, Waterbury



Geraldo  
Grade 10, Waterbury  
"Sunrise World Drawing"

"As the sun comes out with  
each new day, so should you..."



## How Do We Respond?

So how do we proceed as adults in the wake of this tragedy for children? What do we do differently in our own lives with our families in our schools and communities, as well as in state policy? Despite fiscal constraints and changing priorities, what policies can we build that respond to children and their families' heightened fears and concerns?

- **Connect.** Many children feel isolated, scared and confused. Counter that by giving them comfort and understanding.
- **Help children become everyday heroes.** Give them purposeful ways to give back and realize their impact on the world. It's tempting to deal with our fears about war and terrorism by narrowing our views and interests. We must help children fight this impulse.

- **Show antipathy to violence and hatred.** Bullying and racial bias in school are local forms of the cruelty we see on the world stage. When children learn to respect each other, they begin to make their environments safer.
- **Make schools safe.** This is where children spend much of their days, so school must be as safe as home. Indeed, we need to open schools up for greater use during evenings and weekends, making them a place for children and youth to go when they have free time.
- **Know what to do, as much as possible, in a disaster.** Develop emergency plans that include roles for the children. Ensure that they know adults are thinking about their safety.
- **Honor good works and deeds.** Pointing to the accomplishments of others creates examples for our children and youth. It also instills respect, caring, and hope.

- **Don't let technology become a false friend or babysitter in complex times.** What our increasingly wired society has to offer is staggering – but it can also isolate young people, lulling them into a sense of connecting to others, when they're not.
- **Show our values and civic interests.** Dishonesty, greed, and false information are part of everyday news. Show children every day what matters and why. Model our values in what we do.
- **Help parents lead.** We need parents to guide and advocate for children. Yet, there is often a gap between parental desire to improve conditions for children and the skills to affect the change. We need to offer a democracy tool kit of specific skills on how to create change in policy for children.
- **Ensure that we include children in our protection of this country.** Children have been significantly cut in budgets since 9/11. Yet, they are the workforce and protectors of this nation for the future.

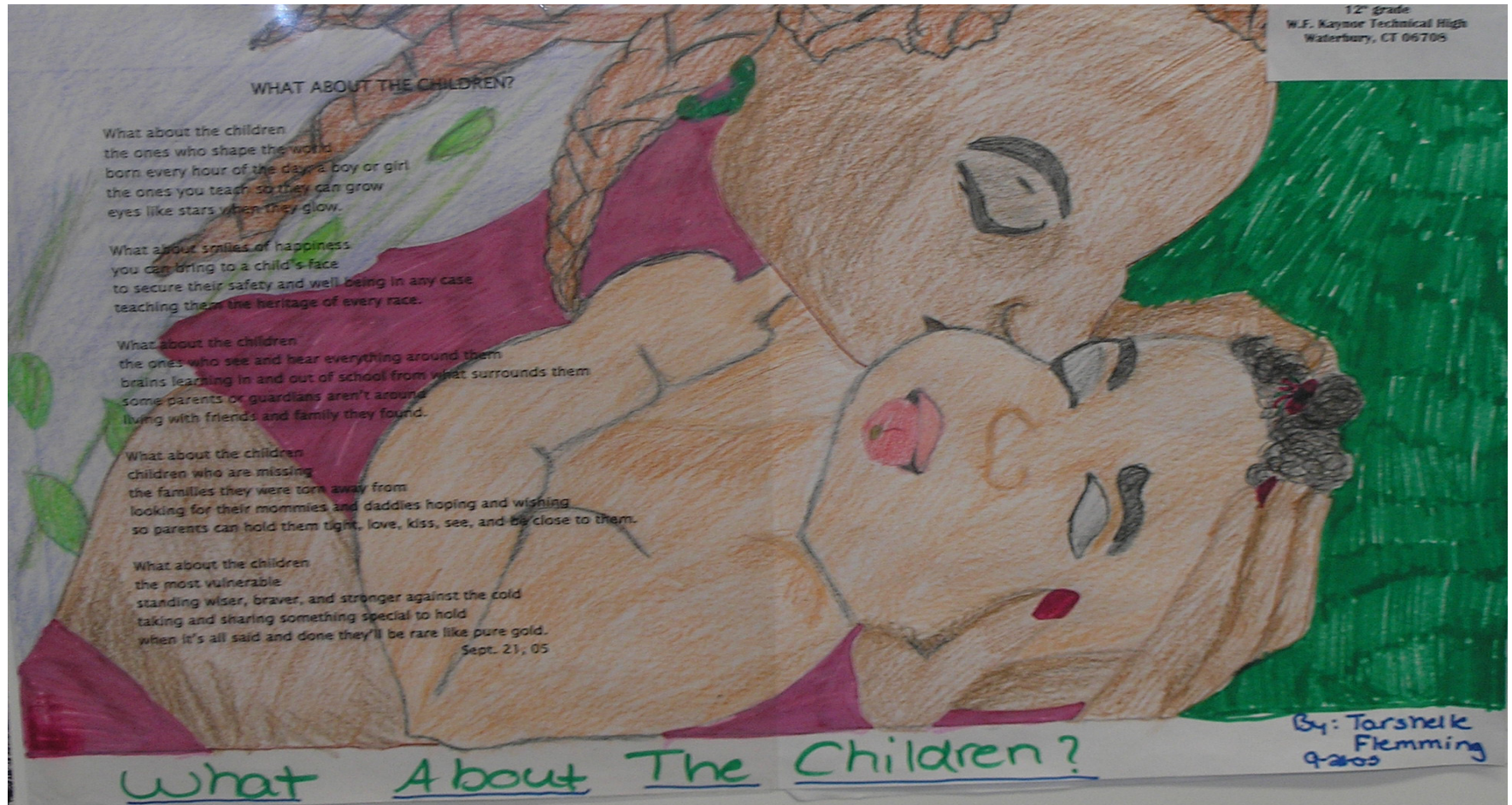
- **Help restore faith in government.** What was once a high expectation of government and the public good, with clear understanding of how to interface with civic leaders is now low expectation with meager civic engagement.
- **Practice democracy.** Terrorism has challenged our principles of freedom, legal justice, and individuality. But it also shown how often we take them for granted.
- **Model teamwork.** In today's increasingly interdependent world, the resilience and strength of both individuals and society depend upon their ability to cooperate for common purposes. Democracy is a dynamic process, responsive to needs, respectful of the rule of law and dependent on the will and the skills of citizens fulfilling their responsibility for the common good.



- **Create environments for addressing differences.** After the 9/11 attacks and the abandonment of our citizens in New Orleans, there is an increased need for tools and resources to help parents and educators talk with young people about respecting differences and combating prejudice. Provide children and youth with opportunities for dialogue about bigotry and hate as well as building bridges of understanding.
- **Bring hope back that change can happen.** For many, current events have put hope in a back drawer. We owe it to our children to reclaim it. Children need hope if they're to lead in constructive, creative ways.

Children and youth are informing Connecticut that we need to protect them and honor them as assets. This is as it should be – the next generation bringing parents to the root of the matter and showing that each generation will make the world an even better place. Children want protection, values, diversity and connection. If we can strive to do this for a nation, we can also do it for our children.

# Tarshelle Grade 12, Waterbury



"What about the children  
The ones who shape the world  
Born every hour of the day; a boy or girl  
The ones you teach so they can grow  
Eyes like stars when they glow..."

View this at the Connecticut  
Commission on Children website:

[www.cga.ct.gov/coc](http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc)

